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The composition teacher in the primary grades should emphasize content and ideas, not form and properly written expression, to develop the students' interest in writing. By surrounding the students with fine literature, by presenting them with model stories to imitate, and by letting them make up alternate endings and illustrations for stories, the teacher encourages original thought and pleasure in writing. Another approach, the group planning of a story to illustrate a fable, not only increases the students' appreciation for this type of literature, but also requires an abstract level of thinking. In correcting papers, the teacher should avoid close grading and requiring the story to be recopied; for the evaluation of a paper should depend on content and communication of thought rather than on "correct" mechanics. (LH)

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ELDONNA L. EVERTTS

Dinosaurs, Witches, and Anti-Aircraft: Primary Composition

As the tender shoots of young winter wheat stool and develop so slowly that growth is apparent only by close examination, so it is with composition in the early years of the elementary school. Teachers may frequently be so close to the gradual development of their pupils that they cannot recognize the steps in the composition process or note the progress being made. Perhaps that is why they sometimes feel that they must teach *all* aspects of composition *all* the time. It may appear to them that each person becomes a writer by some miraculous transformation that occurs instantaneously. The process actually begins when the primary schoolteacher reads a few brief stories, jingles, or tales in the atmosphere of a warm and friendly classroom. And then, often quite suddenly, the teacher becomes aware of a class of primary school children writing freely—having *fun* with composition—and eagerly seeking the ways and means of producing better, more ambitious compositions.

But the process in between is a very complex process. However, there are two basic principles which contribute to the entire process: (1) composing is an art, an art concerned with the creation of ideas as well as with the structuring of ideas; (2) the process itself is essentially creative. *Particularly* in the primary grades, the concentration in matters of composition should be on content, not exclusively on forms; the teacher of composition must encourage ideas, not only properly written expression. Each pupil must be permitted to approach the matter of composing from his own point of view, according to his own need or urge to create, and his own experiences with both the ideas he is attempting to express and the media of expressions he chooses to use.

No single series of easy steps can be followed when one learns to write easily and well. Even with recognized authors it is apparent that they follow more than one pathway in this complex process. Several practices, however, appear to be more expedient than others. What are some of the approaches which enable pupils to write more easily?

Contact with Literature

The child has learned to speak and manipulate his native language by listening to those around him. The teacher who reads good stories to her children provides them with experiences to arouse expectation and encouragement to compose. We should surround primary children, indeed, students at all levels, with fine literature so that they can profit from hearing it read aloud.

Composition with Pictures

A step in composition building based upon literature occurred in a first-grade class when the teacher read *The Gingerbread Boy*—the original version in which the fox eats the Gingerbread Boy while

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carrying him across a stream. This is a delightful tale told simply and directly and with no sentimentality concerning the fate of the Gingerbread Boy. For a few minutes the class discussed other ways the story could have ended, and then the teacher suggested that each child make a crayon drawing to illustrate another ending. When the pupils finished their pictures, they brought them to the teacher. She wrote the captions that they composed for their pictures. Following are some of the sentences[1] which were dictated:

A man caught him with a fishing pole.
He's looking at us because he doesn't want to fall in the river.
He slipped in the river.
He tried to swim but got bitten by a daddy and baby shark.
The fox dumped him in the lake.
A horse took him across and ate him.[2]

The sentences are not confined to any beginning reading word list. A clear, judicious choice of words is evident. Imagine the fun the class had as each one showed his picture and "read," with the teacher's help, his own "story!"

This activity channels the imagination toward creating story elements—in this instance, another possible ending. In connection with the same activity, the teacher could begin to build toward an appreciation for other elements of composition, perhaps the selection of appropriate words to convey *exact* meaning. Words like *dumped, slipped, shark,* or *fishing pole,* taken from the individual child's speaking vocabulary, could be used as a source of vocabulary enrichment and enlargement for the other children.

[1]Teacher: Mrs. Alice Schnabel, Grade 1, Prescott School, Lincoln, Nebraska.
[2]All compositions in this article were written in classrooms where the Nebraska English Curriculum is being taught.

Use of Models

Pupils acquainted with good stories are able to use them as models for their own writing. Many times a well-loved story can provide a springboard for imaginative thought. Last October the following selection was written by a second-grade pupil after her class had listened to their teacher read *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* by Dr. Seuss. When the pupil read the story aloud to me she explained that she left out a few words in her writing, but that she would add them as she read her story. The manuscript writing was most legible; she had used commas and exclamation marks correctly. A few words were spelled phonetically, showing that the pupil was gaining a command over the written forms.[3]

To Think I Saw It on Skunk Street

I was walking on Skunk Street one morning. I saw an elephant and a pumpkin chariot with a man in it. "Skunk Street!!" I said. I must change that man into a ghost! So there was the ghost. Well the elephant doesn't go very good with the ghost. So I'll change it into a faun. There. Now that looks good. But that isn't enough. I think I'll change the pumpkin chariot into a broom stick. Well, I think the ghost should be a witch and the faun should be a skeleton. The broom should be a car. Oh, dear! I am almost home. Oh! The mayor and the paper. I am home! What did you see? Just a pumpkin chariot, a man, and an elephant.[4]

After hearing *The Bears on Hemlock Mountain* by Alice Dalgliesh and being familiar with the plot of patterns of the fairytales, a young boy in the second grade wrote a story which paralleled that of the book—a little boy goes on an errand, meets

[3]Mechanical errors have been corrected in the following pupils' papers for easy reading.
[4]Teacher: Miss Ethel Sweet, Grade 2, Meadow Lane School, Lincoln, Nebraska.

with obstacles, and then returns home safely.

The Incredible Errand

Once there was a old woman who lived in an old cottage. She had a very fine boy. She sent him on an errand. Now she wanted him to go through the spooky woods to his grandmother's house. She said, "Boy you must go to your grandmother's house to borrow a cup of sugar." Now the boy was scared for a minute.

Off he went to borrow a cup of sugar.

As he got further into the forest he was wondering about bears, and foxes, and lions. By and by he met a bear. So he took another path. And right at the end of the path stood a fox. So as fast as he could he took another path. Now for sure he was lost. As he walked on right in front of him stood a lion.

So he ran all the way home without going to his grandmother's house. And there he lived happily, ever after.[5]

Sometimes a teacher will help pupils to write about the same topic but to approach it with a different purpose. The following selections were written in October by third graders after the teacher had read to them *Winnie-the-Pooh* by A. A. Milne. The first selection uses a basic plot pattern—leaving a secure home, venturing into the world and overcoming a monster, and returning to the secure home. It tells how one boy imagines he could catch his own heffalump.

Once upon a time a boy named Jeff lived in a house with his mother and his father and his little sister Kathy. Kathy was only six years old. One day Jeff was reading the paper and in this one article about Heffalumps. People are trying to catch them. I'm going to try to catch one too,. said Jeff. So he started off.

He came to a sort of like forest. He got up into a tree and tied a rope on a branch and put a little trap down. He put some cloth around it so it wouldn't hurt the Heffalump. After a while he was in the bushes. Suddenly he saw a little Heffalump in the trap. It was a baby one. He went out to the tree. The baby Heffalump had a twinkle in his eyes. He was trying to tell him that his Mother got killed. Jeff picked him up and went home.[6]

The second selection is related to the same story but this time the young writer tries to describe what a heffalump is like and in doing so has caught the spirit of fun with language.

The heffalump is a pump and looks like a nump. And runs about ahead of your toe and says good-by and hello. He's a pretty nice pet to have. And he sits by day and night trying to learn to read and write. Good-night he says to you, tonight. He'll see you in the morning. GOOD-NIGHT![7]

The rhetorical problems of selecting the proper point of view for a specific situation or of adapting the language of a composition to a specific audience are difficult problems that have no magic, formulaic solutions. These problems are solved only through many writing experiences over a relatively long period of time. Nevertheless, even primary children are aware of their audience and this awareness does influence their writing. The third-grade boy who wrote the following expository selection on dinosaurs certainly envisaged his reader as he wrote.

Dinosaurs of Long Ago

Long ago before man lived the dinosaurs ruled earth. Big brontosaurs was so big that everytime he walked he shook the earth! He was 70 feet long. But let us see about the 50 foot long tyrannosaurus rex. He was a meat eater! But he could not eat one

[5]Teacher: Miss Joeline Beck, Grade 2, Prescott School, Lincoln, Nebraska.

[6]Teacher: Mrs. Margaret Tatroe, Grade 3, Prescott School, Lincoln, Nebraska.

[7]Teacher: Mrs. Margaret Tatroe, Grade 3, Prescott School, Lincoln, Nebraska.

dinosaur triceratops who had horns—three of them! They looked like this.

But he could eat Brontosaurs! But brontosaurs could go in the water where tyrannosaurus rex could not go! Now let me tell you about stegosaurus, the dinosaur with the big Plates. Stegosaurus had a row of plates down his back. Rattle there he goes. Now let me tell you about the pterodactyl. The "p" is silent. It is a flying bird but it has leather wings. There are many others but I don't have time to tell you about them.[8]

Composition in Groups

In planning a curriculum, consideration must be given to an appreciation of literature on progressively more mature levels. The relatively high level of abstraction found in the morals of fables makes them sometimes difficult for children to comprehend. Only after they have investigated a large number of concepts can children make a generalization that can be more than a mere verbalization. After a broad experience with fables as stories for several years pupils may wish to explore this area for their own writing experiences. The casual exposure to fables in the primary grades makes it possible to develop an appreciation for this type of writing at later levels. As a whole, writing fables requires a higher level of thought than most stories because one begins with a high level of abstraction and then develops a story to objectify the abstraction. Sometimes a more difficult writing task can be handled in a group situation in which the pupils can discuss and clarify their thoughts and ideas aloud before attempting to record them. To illustrate, a committee of five fifth-grade pupils selected one of their own number as secretary to record their group composition based upon the moral: "Don't try to be something you aren't." This is the story the group created.

The Dog and the Canary

One day a dog was walking along the road. He saw a little yellow canary, and wished that he could fly like her.

He shouted, "Little yellow canary, would you teach me to fly like you?"

"Simpleton," she said. "You should have more sense."

"Then I will learn by myself," said the dog.

So the next day he went to the top of a very, very high cliff and jumped off. He flapped and flapped his arms, but fell to the ground below, dead.

Moral: Don't try to be something you aren't.[9]

Primary teachers have often used group stories for beginning reading. However, the restriction of dictated sentences for reading instruction alone limits the potential value of using dictated stories as an approach to individual composition. Planning a story together, recording the story, adding illustrations, and later reading the story creates an interest in writing individual stories.

One first-grade teacher read aloud "This Is the House that Jack Built." She suggested the pupils create their own selections patterned after the model. Various children suggested ideas, words, and lines so rapidly that I could scarcely write fast enough to record the lines of their oral compositions:

This is the dog who worried the cat
Who climbed the tree
Who scared the bird
Who ate the crumbs
That David threw out.

This is the car
That went along the road
That stopped at the store
That got the groceries
That ran out of gas
And had to get more.[10]

[8]Teacher: Miss Lois Cunningham, Grade 3, Harrison School, Omaha, Nebraska.

[9]Teacher: Mrs. Alice Vandenbosch, Grade 5, Meadow Lane School, Lincoln, Nebraska.

[10]Teacher: Mrs. Florence McGonagle, Bancroft School, Grade 1, Lincoln, Nebraska.

Discouraging Marks

A close grading or correcting of pupil compositions indicates a premium has been placed upon correct form rather than upon ideas or content. Too much concern with "correctness" suggests what the teacher considers most valuable, or it indicates that teachers lack the ability to evaluate the higher cognitive process expressed in the composition. Mere "correctness" is not enough. A composition must be clear, concise, and convey a distinct message, story, or idea as well.

Pupils can be helped to proofread their papers and to use acceptable punctuation, capitalization, and usage, but they first learn to record their ideas. It is easier to "clean up" a fresh story than to try to impart life and vitality to a correct but stale story. Vicars Bell, headmaster of an English village school, believed strongly that an insistence upon adult standards in children's writing kills the power to speak directly from mind to mind and that this insistence will produce either nothing at all or faultless but insipid writing.[11]

Correcting papers by the teacher does not insure correct writing by the pupils. The copying and recopying of a story by primary pupils is a good example of inverse proportions. The more time spent in the process of copying, the less true learning or creative expression becomes possible.

There is a time to build skills, but it is not while the child is creating and building a new story. The classroom teacher should study the pupils' compositions and notice which skills or abilities are lacking. She should then plan a session in which these skills can be discussed. For example, the problem of how to handle direct quotations should be discussed when pupils need to develop the skill for their own stories. The pupils can discover how this problem is handled in their readers and library books; and subsequently they might look at some of their own stories and find examples of direct quotations and experiment with the use of quotation marks. No effort should be made to force children to use quotation marks too soon, but students can be helped to become aware of their value and use.

The Final Copy

Occasionally a child needs to make a final copy from a first, rough draft which has been corrected. Preparing a class newspaper or a folder of stories for the local children's hospital may be worth the time of recopying. No new learning is to be gained by the recopying, but the value is in the use of the end-product. The enjoyment of hard work and joy in its completion is often sufficient reward in itself.

Evaluation

The very approach to the writing process and the objectives which teachers hope to attain determine their methods of evaluation. At the primary level one begins with content—to use the ideas children want to express. This implies that teachers help them build a repository of experiences from life and literature which can be utilized when necessary. Sometimes pupils can be helped by guiding them to see, hear, and feel elements and events in their environment which they never before realized. The reading and discussion of literature thus becomes an integral part of the curriculum.

When a teacher reads a pupil's composition she should note especially the basic idea or story the pupil is trying to express with written symbols. *The content is priceless creativity; the form, mechanical memory.* Did the pupil communicate his thoughts? Did he have enough background from either life or vicarious experiences to

[11] Vicars Bell, *On Learning the English Tongue.* London: Faber and Faver, 1953.

deal mentally with his topic? Did his choice of words contribute to his intended message? Did he use a central theme, plot structure, or have a purpose for the writing? What conventions of spelling, punctuation, and capitalization did he use well? Was there a variety of sentence patterns? Did he seem to enjoy writing even though it demanded close attention, thought, and effort?

The sole criterion of length is of little value in evaluating the worth of a piece of writing. Sometimes a too long story indicates looseness of thought and an inability to push aside unnecessary details. Teachers must be careful not to praise pupil compositions on the basis of length alone. The ability to push essential elements to a peak is seen in this story which was written by a girl in the third grade early in the school year. It was written after she had heard the story of *Madeline's Rescue* by Ludwig Bemelmans, a story of twelve French orphans who fall in love with the dog who rescues Madeline from the river.

Madeline

It snowed the first day of school. The snow turned into ice. Madeline said, I want to go out and play on the ice. Madeline slipped and fell down. Miss Clavel said, "I guess that's the end of Madeline."[12]

Evaluation is not only a teacher activity; it is also a basic activity for the pupil. Essentially, then, evaluation is part of the composing process. Even during the recording process, the writer is constantly evaluating and making choices. When the story is completed, evaluation still remains. It is an on-going operation; it becomes active whenever the selection is read or discussed.

Summary

While it is true at all levels, it is especially true at the primary level that the quality of composition varies with the quality of input. Teachers will accomplish just what they put into their composition programs. They should know that just as the wheat, when given the elements which promoted growth and maturity produced abundant heads of grain, so the pupils in their classes will develop sophistication in language and composition by living within a good curriculum.

This closing story combines the fairytale and the science stories of today.

The Witch

One day the witch was riding on her broom over a town, when she was shot down by anti-aircraft. She was sent to prison and one week later was put in front of a firing squad. Her last words were, "Witches don't get away with anything these days."[13]

[12]Teacher: Mrs. Margaret Tatroe, Grade 3, Prescott School, Lincoln, Nebraska.

[13]Teacher: Miss Elizabeth McCluskey, Grade 5, Dundee School, Omaha, Nebraska.

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